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E. Wayne Carp
Pacific Lutheran University

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The Sealed Adoption Records
Controversy in Historical Perspective:
The Case of the Children's Home
Society of Washington, 1895–1988*

E. WAYNE CARP

Pacific Lutheran University
Department of History

**I would like to thank Charlie Langdon and D. Sharon Osborne, past and present Executive Directors of the Children's Home Society of Washington (CHSW), for permission to use the CHSW's case records, and Randy Perin, Supervisor of the CHSW's Adoption Resource Center, whose enthusiasm for this project has been inspirational. I am also grateful to Roger W. Toogood, Executive Director of the Children's Home Society of Minnesota (CHSM), and Marietta E. Spencer, Program Director, Post-Legal Adoption Services, CHSM, for permitting me access to the Society's case records. I would also like to thank Paula Shields, George Behlmer, Ruth Bloch, Clarke A. Chambers, Paula S. Fass, Ray Jonas, William J. Rorabaugh, and Eugene Sheridan for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.*

This paper samples the 21,000 adoption case records of the Children's Home Society of Washington between 1895 and 1988 in order to document and analyze the history of twentieth-century postadoption contact for adult adopted persons and birthparents. It demonstrates that as a result of a variety of factors — primarily social work professionalism, the demographic profile of birthmothers, and the influence of psychoanalytic theory on casework practice — the Society's policy on releasing family information to clients evolved through three phases. In the first and longest phase, roughly from 1895 to the mid-1950s, the Society maintained that adult adopted persons were entitled to identifying and nonidentifying information and that birthparents had a legitimate claim to nonidentifying information. In the second phase, a transitional period spanning the mid-1950s to the late-1960s, the Society's postadoption policy of relative openness became more restrictive. In the final phase, beginning in the early 1970s, the Society established a firm policy of closed records.

The central issue igniting the Adoption Rights Movement in 1971 was the inability of adopted persons to gain access to information about their birth families contained in adoption case records (Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1978, chap. 3). Institutional custodians of adoption records — courts, hospitals, and adoption agencies — citing state statutes, some more than a half century old, refused to divulge any family information to adopted persons or birthparents searching for their biological kin. As early as 1917 Minnesota enacted legislation closing adoption records to public inspection, and other states soon followed. By 1943, spurred on by reformers wanting to protect the child born out of wedlock from the stigma of illegitimacy, 23 states had passed similar legislation sealing adoption records. By the early 1970s, sealed records had become a standard, if not universal, feature of the adoption process, but they had also achieved a seeming immutability that belied the past from which they emerged (Heisterman, 1935, pp. 289–290; Colby, 1942, pp. 70–71).

Not surprisingly, adoption rights activists assume that adoption records have always been sealed and that adoption agency officials have always been uncooperative in providing members of the adoption triad — adoptive parents, birthparents, and adopted persons — with family information (Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1978; Child Welfare, 1976; DiGiulio, 1979; Newborg, 1979; Weidell, 1980; Geissinger, 1984; Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Wertkin, 1986; Sachdev, 1988). These assumptions are so deeply rooted, so unquestioned, that adoption rights advocates have not even asked the question, “Have adoption records always been sealed?” because they begin with the ahistorical presumption that what is has always been so, and proceed accordingly. When adoption rights activists attempt to account for this state of affairs they assume, logically though without evidence, that adoption agencies and adoptive parents have conspired to seal the records (Fisher, 1971; Lifton, 1975, p. 12, 31, 105). But in fact, none of these assumptions is historically accurate. This article provides new information about a historical past that is all but unknown to historians, social workers, and proponents of unsealing adoption records. It will demonstrate that the Children’s Home Society of Washington State, the institution used here as a case study, had vast discretionary power over how much and

to whom it divulged family information. The story is complicated, and the Society's response varied enormously, depending on which members of the adoption triad were involved, what kind of information they desired, and when they made their inquiry. Generally, the Society's policy on releasing information to triad members evolved through three phases. In the first and longest phase, roughly from 1895 to the mid-1950s, the Society believed that adult adopted persons, regardless of legal restrictions, were entitled to identifying information (surnames and addresses that would lead to locating birthparents) and non-identifying information (medical history or nationality) as long as it was in their best interests. During this first phase, the Society also responded to birthparents, usually birthmothers, as if they had a legitimate claim to nonidentifying information. Indeed what is most striking about the Society's initial postadoption contact policy was the way it used its discretionary power to divulge family information. In the postwar period, however, the Society's initial postadoption policy of relative openness gave way to a policy of secrecy that was shaped in the Cold War era primarily by social workers' increasing commitment to professional secrecy, the changing demographic profile of birthmothers, and the influence of psychoanalytic theory on casework policy. The second phase of the Society's postadoption policy — roughly from 1955 to 1968 — was one of transition. The Society became increasingly restrictive in giving out identifying information to adult adopted persons and nonidentifying information to birthmothers, believing that those who sought such data were irrational or emotionally disturbed. In the third phase, from the 1970s to the present, the CHSW established a firm postadoption policy of closed records. The Society reversed its policy of voluntarily giving nonidentifying information to adult adopted persons and refused to divulge any identifying family information to triad members without a court order.

Data and Method

This article uses for the first time the confidential adoption case records of a twentieth-century adoption agency: the Children's Home Society of Washington (CHSW or Society). The records run consecutively from 1895 to 1973 when, because of

the shortage of Caucasian infants, the Society all but ceased placing children for adoption. One out of every ten of the CHSW's 21,000 adoption case records has been examined for evidence of its administrative policies toward releasing family information. (Data that the Society has added to the case records on postadoption contact has been examined through 1988.) The study's sample yielded 463 cases, comprising 479 individuals who returned to the Society 599 times in quest of information about themselves, siblings, or birthparents. Thus, almost a quarter of all cases (N=463) in this sample included postadoption contact. The case records have been supplemented by the Society's disorganized and incomplete minutes of supervisors' meetings, personnel files, and annual reports, dating mostly from the 1950s and 1960s.

This article is a case study. But corroborative evidence from the Child Welfare League of American (CWLA) — a privately supported national organization of affiliate adoption agencies — and geographically diverse child placement agencies, such as those in Illinois, New York, Minnesota, Ohio, and Florida, lends strong support that the CHSW's policies were not unique. Rather, they were representative of mainstream adoption agencies' attitudes and practices. In evaluating the CHSW's representativeness, it must be kept in mind that most adoption agencies still refuse to allow researchers access to their confidential case records. Scholars are invited to test this article's representativeness by conducting research at their local adoption agencies. Until adoption agency officials permit researchers access to the case records, the data presented here may be the best historians and social workers will ever get.

The Children's Home Society of Washington

In 1896, a Methodist minister, the Rev. Harrison D. Brown, and his wife, Libbie Beach Brown, the former Superintendent of the Nebraska State Orphanage, founded the Washington Children's Home Society.¹ The CHSW was an auxiliary association of the National Children's Home Society (NCHS) established in 1883 by the Rev. Martin Van Buren Van Arsdale, a Presbyterian minister from Illinois. The NCHS, part of a larger child welfare reform movement that swept the United States in the last half

of the nineteenth century, was dedicated to removing children from almshouses and orphanages and placing them in family homes. By the 1890s, Children's Home Societies had sprung up in Iowa, California, Indiana, Missouri, and Michigan; twenty years later, there were 28 Societies placing children in adoptive homes in 32 states (Tiffin, 1982, pp. 104–105).

Although five other child-placing institutions existed in Washington State when the CHSW was founded, the Browns quickly found themselves with a heavy case load. As the demand for child welfare services increased, the Society slowly added staff members, expanded geographically, and began to develop all the services related to adoption. By the 1960s, the CHSW averaged 421 adoptions a year, representing approximately 25% of Washington's adoptions. During the first 94 years of its existence the Society oversaw some 19,500 adoptions. In 1970, just before it permanently stopped placing children in adoptive homes, the Society operated six branches in every part of the state and administered programs which included homes for unmarried mothers, foster care for children prior to adoption, institutional or group care for older children, and, of course, adoption.²

The Society's Clients and their Motivations for Postadoption Contact

Among its many tasks, Society officials provided returning clients with family information. Throughout the twentieth century, birthparents, adult adopted persons, and adoptive parents regularly contacted the Society for information about their birth families. The most frequent seekers of information were adult adopted persons, who constituted 51% of the sample, followed by birthmothers (19%), siblings of adopted persons (13%), adoptive parents (8%), birthfathers (4.5%), and birth relatives of the adopted child such as grandparents or aunts and uncles (4.5%) (Table 1).³

Members of the adoption triad returned to the Society for different purposes. Adopted persons returned to the Society for three main reasons: to obtain copies of their birth certificates, to receive background and genetic information, and to contact members of their biological family. Of those requesting

Table 1

*Postadoption Contact By Type Of Client
Children's Home Society of Washington, 1895-1988 (N=463)*

Type Of Client	%	(N)
Adopted Persons	51.0	237
Birthmothers	19.0	89
Siblings	13.0	59
Adoptive Parents	8.0	37
Birthfathers	4.5	21
Relatives	4.5	20
Total	100.0%	463

Source: Case records, Children's Home Society Washington, Seattle, WA.

background or genetic information, the median age was twenty-three, and almost two-thirds were women. All birthmothers who contacted the Society wanted to know about their child's welfare: they asked about the baby's health or the character of the adoptive parents or requested the child's photograph. Birthmothers' median age when relinquishing their child was 20 years, and they usually returned to the CHSW within three years of placing the child for adoption. Siblings wanted to know the whereabouts of their brothers or sisters. Birthfathers and relatives, like birthmothers, sought information about the child's welfare. Adoptive parents returned to the Society seeking a birth certificate for their adopted child or information on the child's background and medical history (Table 2).

The Society's Postadoption Policy Toward Adoption Triad Members

Birthparents

When former clients returned to the CHSW for family information, agency officials initiated sincere efforts to accommodate their requests. Society workers used several means to promote relationships between birthparents and the children they relinquished. On rare occasions, officials informed birthparents of

Table 2

*Types Of Requests Initiated By Adult Adopted Persons
Children's Home Society Washington, 1895-1988 (N=237)*

Type of Request	%	(N)
Birth Certificate	21.0	49
Background or Genetic Information	51.0	122
Contact with Birthparents	19.0	44
Contact with Sibling	8.0	19
Other	1.0	3 ^a
Total	100.0%	237

^a Includes two requests for help in securing employment and one request for a letter of recommendation to join the U.S. Army.

Source: Case records, Children's Home Society Washington, Seattle, WA.

the adoptive parents' identity. In August 1910, the Society's Director, the Reverend L. J. Covington, gave birthfather John M. the address of and a letter of introduction to the adoptive parents of John's daughter Mary, who had been placed with them a month earlier. Covington explained to the adoptive parents that because John had demonstrated his ability to provide for the child, he thought it best that Mary be returned to her original parents. Covington regretted that the adoptive parents had become attached to Mary but urged them to "come in at your convenience and I will see what we can do about giving you another girl."⁴

Revealing the identities of adoptive parents to birthparents was exceptional, however, and it is significant that in all cases the Society confided in birthfathers. Even in this era of relative openness, the Society's policy toward birthparents requesting the whereabouts of a child was restrictive. Before the twentieth century it was axiomatic that birthparents should never be told the names of the adoptive parents or the child's location after relinquishing a child. Fears that the birthparents would reclaim the child or blackmail the adoptive parents initially fueled the policy of secrecy ("Whereabouts," 1900, p. 8; Illinois Children's

Home and Aid Society, 1916; Spence Alumnae Society, 1925, pp. 8–11). In general, Society officials refused to divulge the child's location to birthparents.

What must be emphasized, however, is that Society officials actively cooperated with birthparents' requests and demands for facts about their child's welfare. They invariably provided birthparents with optimistic details of the child's development and progress in school, but suggested it would be unfair for them to interfere with adoptive parents, who had invested so much time and energy in raising the child. Nor were these status reports merely routine and outdated summaries of the case record. At times, Society case workers visited the adoptive parents' home, checked on the child's welfare, and even requested the child's photograph for the birthmother.⁵

The most notable aspect of the Society's policy toward birthparents before World War II is the openness with which it responded when they requested the whereabouts of their *grown* children. When dealing with a request about adoptees, Society officials acted as though they had a responsibility to reunite birthparents with their grown children. This was manifested in a number of ways. Sometimes, Society caseworkers facilitated reunions by personally conducting detailed searches for the adult children of birthparents.⁶ More commonly, however, the Society functioned with birthparents as a passive adoption disclosure registry. Case workers would inform birthparents that they would keep their letters of inquiry on file and if their child contacted the Society they would "be very happy to put him in touch with his mother."⁷

Adult Adopted Persons

The Society's policy of providing birthmothers with non-identifying information such as the welfare of their child and acting as a passive adoption disclosure registry did not violate state law until 1943 when the legislature sealed "all records of any [adoption] proceeding" and ordered that they could not be opened except "for good cause shown," a phrase which belies the almost absolute restrictions courts have since imposed (Session Laws of the State of Washington, 1943; Lawrence, 1981; Poulin, 1987–1988). Remarkably, however, even state legislation

had little practical effect on the Society's policy of releasing information to adult adopted persons. Until the mid-1970s, Society adoption case workers simply ignored state law prohibiting the release of nonidentifying family information.⁸

Adult adopted persons were the primary beneficiaries of the CHSW's policy of freely divulging family information. As late as 1969, Society case workers gave *identifying* family information to adoptees upon request. When a young adoptee in 1930 "called at the office to find out about himself," Director Ralls instructed a staff member "to give him any information I could find in the file which I did." The staff member noted in her files that "the boy went away very happy."⁹ Similarly, when the wife of an adopted person wrote the Society in the same year requesting information for her husband, who "would like very much to know about his own people and what his real name is," Ralls sent him his birthmother's name, his birthdate, given name, the date of his relinquishment, and the name and date of his first placement.¹⁰ Additional examples could easily be multiplied.¹¹

Society caseworkers also eagerly assisted reunions of siblings who had been separated when young, though they made a sharp distinction between adult and underage siblings. When adoptees requested information about the location of their adult siblings, Society officials sent it to them immediately.¹² If the Society did not possess the information requested, case workers responded sympathetically. When Doreen K. inquired about her brother Lester in 1924, District Supervisor Charles S. Revelle was unable to inform her of his location, though he did provide her with the name and address of Lester's adoptive parents. Revelle's reply summarized the Society's policy and illustrates the cooperative spirit with which it responded to requests for family information: "We have been hoping that as this boy grew up, he would do as you have done; namely inquire at this office concerning his relatives. Many do this but so far we have not heard from him . . . You may be sure that if we get any information regarding his present whereabouts, we will immediately communicate with you."¹³ Society officials refused, however, to divulge any information about siblings who were still living with the adoptive parents. In such instances, it played the role of a confidential intermediary, acting as a neutral third-party

between the adoptive parents and the adoptee seeking the sibling. They would do this by contacting the adoptive parents to obtain permission before releasing any information.¹⁴

Yet for all of its willingness to release family information and arrange reunions, the Society's policy toward adoptees was not one of "open records." The term is simply anachronistic before the era of the Adoption Rights Movement. Although social work experts asserted the child's right to family information, they never intended that adoptees should be allowed to read their own files. Nor were they prepared to reveal everything in the record. Even the most progressive social workers such as Grace Abbott, the Children's Bureau chief, counseled her compatriots that in certain circumstances professional social workers were responsible for *withholding* family information (Abbott, 1933, p. 40).

The Society's caseworkers adhered to professional social work principles by devising various strategies to limit the kind of information triad members received. They tried to prevent curious adoptees from discovering "unpleasant" truths about their birth families. Social workers also sought to protect birthparents, especially birthmothers, from being discovered by the children they had placed with the Society. Society case workers sometimes tried to stall or discourage young adoptees — usually those eighteen to twenty years of age — who were searching for their birthparents or siblings because of the potential embarrassment.¹⁵

The most common tactic Society case workers used to prevent some adoptees from finding out "unpleasant" truths and the one recommended by adoption experts, however, was simply not to tell them. Throughout most of its existence, the Society paternalistically omitted telling a small number of adoptees about the circumstances of their birth (i.e., that they were illegitimate), their parents' medical background (i.e., that there was a history of insanity or venereal disease), or their parents' racial background (i.e., African-American or American Indian). A sincere wish to spare the individual from painful emotions or, as they saw it, from social stigmatization motivated these omissions. For example, in 1939, caseworker Mary Lehn did not tell nineteen year-old Gloria D., an adopted woman searching for

her birthparents, that her mother was confined in an institution for incorrigible women, nor that her father was in prison for sodomizing her nine year-old sister. Instead, Lehn told Gloria only "the positive things I knew, leaving out the very negative which are certainly in the record."¹⁶ In emphasizing the strategies of adoption workers for withholding "unpleasant" truths from adoptees, we must not lose sight of the far more historically significant point that before the mid-1960s they gave *identifying* family history to most clients who requested it.

An Explanation of the Society's Postadoption Policy

How does one explain the Society's relatively open and sympathetic postadoption policy toward birthparents and adoptees? The answer lies in the matrix of record keeping, social work professionalism, the crisis of the family in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and the particular pre-World War II demographic make-up of birthmothers and their children. All of these factors worked to counteract the trend toward secrecy that had begun to surround the adoption process.

Record Keeping and Social Work Professionalism

The Society's careful maintenance of records was crucial to the ability of birthparents and adoptees to obtain family information, whether identifying or nonidentifying. These family histories — or case records, as they were called by professional social workers in the early twentieth century — functioned as the data base from which adoption workers could "scientifically" determine their clients' needs, train new social workers, undertake research, and educate the public as to the value and purpose of their profession (Bruno, 1916; Richmond, 1917, p. 43; Lubove, 1965, p. 47; Richmond, 1925).

More importantly, at least for the history of postadoption contact, professional social workers by the early 1920s compiled detailed family histories because they believed that children had a right to that information when they grew up. Social workers believed that it was crucial "to conserve somewhere the information which may be of vital importance to the child" (Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society, 1929, p. 6). They repeatedly

deplored any failure to keep accurate records on dependent children. As the Pennsylvania Bureau of Children proclaimed in 1923, "it is better to write a thousand records that are not used than to fail to be able to supply a vital bit of family history when it is needed" (Child Welfare League of America, 1923, p. 3).

Crisis of the Family

Cultural and demographic changes at the turn of the century strengthened the Society's resolve to give family information to birthmothers and adoptees. These changes led many Americans to believe that the traditional family was in a state of crisis. The signs of decay were everywhere: the upsurge in the number of divorces; the drop in the nation's birthrate among native-born, Anglo-Saxon whites; and the dramatic change in traditional sex roles, with young women pursuing a college education, working outside the home, agitating for women's rights, and engaging in premarital sex that resulted in an apparent epidemic of unwed mothers (Mintz and Kellogg, 1988, chap. 6). An alarmed America responded to the perceived crisis of the family by attempting to strengthen it. In the three decades before World War II, physicians, social workers, and adoption specialists, glorifying parenthood and the importance of maintaining "natural" families, counseled unmarried mothers to keep their "illegitimate" children (Romanofsky, 1969, pp. 81–104, 117–139). These injunctions to preserve "natural" families found expression in the Child Welfare League of America's 1932 *Standards For Institutions Caring For Dependent Children*, which stated that "contacts with members of the child's own [i.e., birth] family should be maintained by correspondence and visits, safeguarded when necessary to protect the child and the foster family, and the tie between child and his own family should be fostered and encouraged."¹⁷ Thus, the Society's policies of providing information on relinquished children, facilitating reunions, and acting as a passive adoption disclosure registry conformed to the Child Welfare League of America's injunction to promote ties between birthparents and their children.

Demographics

Most importantly, the demographic profile of the Society's clientele provided a material basis for its relatively open policy

on postadoption contact. Before 1946 — and the end of World War II marks a very clear dividing line — a dramatically high percentage of birthmothers seeking postadoption contact had been married at the time of the child's conception. Before 1946, 65% of children relinquished by these birthmothers were born to married parents compared to *virtually none* afterwards. Most of these prewar birthmothers placed their children for adoption as a result of poverty caused by divorce or desertion. The median age of the children they relinquished was four and one-half years. The advanced age of these children permitted strong bonds to develop between birthmothers and children before relinquishment and gave birthmothers a privileged claim to family information.¹⁸

New Restrictions in the Society's Policies

Birthmothers and Birthparents

Beginning in the 1950s, the Society's attitude and policy toward birthparents and adult adopted persons who requested information slowly became more rigid and less forthcoming. Birthparents were the first to be affected by the CHSW's policy changes. The evolution of the Society's restrictive policy is illustrated by the way it responded, over a period of fourteen years, to three birthmothers who requested photographs of their children. In 1955, a distraught birthmother successfully implored CHSW adoption worker Ruth B. Moscrip for a snapshot of her child. Almost a decade later when another birthmother made the same request, a different caseworker suggested she first discuss the matter with a psychiatrist. Initially, the doctor favored complying with the request, but then changed his mind because he "could see many reasons why it would not be a good idea for [Miss B.] to have a picture of her baby." Finally, in 1969, the Society stopped trying to accommodate birthmothers. When the by now familiar request for a photograph arrived a CHSW caseworker notified a birthmother that "we have a policy of 'no pictures.'" ¹⁹

In another departure from the Society's earlier policy of openness, CHSW officials refused to act as intermediaries between birthparents and adoptive parents. In turning down one

such appeal in 1955, a Society caseworker informed a birthmother that "we do not harass adopting parents in any way."²⁰ Not only did the Society increasingly restrict the amount of information released to birthmothers, but it also began to falsify the data. Society adoption workers occasionally lied to birthmothers about the adopting family's social status or the child's health or the child's placement status. One birthmother was told that her child had been adopted by a college-educated, professional couple rather than, as actually happened, a blue-collar-family with high-school educations. Another was assured that her child was in good health when, in reality, the baby was hospitalized with a serious congenital disease. A third birthmother was informed that her child had been placed for adoption when the child was still in the Society's custody.²¹ Society caseworkers believed that such deception was for the good of their clients. As caseworker Landau stated in justifying her lie to a birthmother about her child's status and adoptive parents, "I felt it was important, for the girl's piece of mind, that we tell her the baby was placed, as I feel if she believes it is placed she will be able to come to peace about it, whereas this way [i.e., telling her the truth] it would only continue to trouble her."²² By the late 1960s, not only were birthmothers receiving less information than before about their children from adoption workers, but there was a strong possibility that the information they did receive had been falsified to avoid upsetting them. In 1969, when Society officials revised the adoption manual's section on "Post-Adoption Services and Service on Closed Cases," birthmothers were not even mentioned.

Adult adopted persons

The CHSW also began restricting adult adopted persons' access to family information. Beginning in the 1950s, it is possible to detect among some Society officials and caseworkers a hardening of attitude, a lessening of sympathy, toward those searching for family members. Although the evidence is fragmentary, it reveals Society adoption workers making decisions that had no precedent in past casework. In 1958, adoptee Bill R. returned to the Society to search for his brothers. Adoption

supervisor Emily Brown tersely noted that "he knew about one brother, Robert, but apparently not about the other, Edward, and he was not told about him."²³ When Wanda M. wanted to locate her birthparents and asked for her father's name, adoption worker "X" lied and told her the Society did not know it.²⁴ For the first time, in 1969, Society officials invoked state law to justify their refusal to divulge family information to adult adopted persons.

Explanation for the Society's Restrictive Postadoption Contact Policy

General Climate of Opinion: The Cold War

What accounts for the Society's change in attitude and policy on releasing information to birthmothers and adult adopted persons? The answer lies in the matrix of social workers' increasing commitment to professional secrecy, demography, and psychoanalytic theory. The difficulties that birthmothers and adult adopted persons experienced in obtaining family information were exacerbated by the Cold War and social workers' growing adherence to the principle of client confidentiality and the importance of professional secrecy in general. In the 1930s, as casework dealt increasingly with emotional and psychological problems, social workers began to emphasize their responsibility not to reveal client-entrusted communications to other social agencies or caseworkers. Their views on confidentiality were first recognized in federal legislation with the passage of an amendment to the Social Security Act, mandating that by July 1941 "a State plan for aid to dependent children must . . . provide safeguards which restrict the use or disclosure of information concerning applicants and recipients to purposes directly connected with the administration of aid to dependent children." Professional secrecy was strongly reinforced in the cultural and political climate of the Cold War, as McCarthyism encouraged inquiries into citizens' personal lives. Both the value and precariousness of the principle of confidentiality were made evident to social workers with the passage in 1951 of the

Jenner Amendment to the Social Security Act, which permitted state governments to open their hitherto confidential welfare records to public scrutiny. In Cold War America, social workers invoked the principle of confidentiality to defend the civil liberties of some of their clients. Ironically, adoption workers applied the same principle to prevent unmarried mothers from obtaining information about their children and adult adopted persons from learning about their birth families (Alves, 1984, chap. 4, pp. 87–90, 160–163, 182–183; quotation on p. 79).

Demographic Change

Ironically, it was in this context of increasing concern about client confidentiality that birthmothers were the first to be affected by the Society's restrictive policy. As noted earlier, a majority of pre-World War II birthmothers were married or divorced, worked outside the home, and had relinquished their children because they were unable to support them. The advanced age of the children they relinquished — their median age was four and one-half years — permitted strong bonds to develop between birthmothers and children and gave birthmothers a privileged claim to family information. In the postwar era, the CHSW's birthmothers' demographic profile changed radically: they were younger and predominantly single; moreover, the vast majority of their children were born out of wedlock and relinquished within days of their birth. Postwar birthmothers' youth, their children's illegitimacy, and the quick separation of mother and child eroded their special claim to receive family information. At the Society, the changing demographic profile of birthmothers and their adoptive children was one important factor in the evolution of its increasingly restrictive policy of releasing family information. Looking back two decades later, caseworker Marian Elliot would explain the Society's openness toward birthmothers as a necessity dictated by demographic circumstances: "a child who had been placed well beyond infancy . . . had a memory of his natural mother." Even if the Society had wanted to enforce strict confidentiality, "it could not be handled in the same way since all parties had so much knowledge of the situation."²⁵ In the postwar era, however, few children entering the Society had memories of their mothers.

Psychoanalytic Studies and the Unmarried Mother

Concomitantly, psychoanalytic studies of unmarried mothers, which depicted them as neurotic at best, psychotic at worst, strengthened adoption workers' resolve to deny birthmothers information about their children. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, under the guise of "scientific" casework, social workers reacted sympathetically to the plight of unwed mothers. Their analysis stressed the underlying causes of heredity and environment, including the responsibility of the father and the community for the child. Social workers' treatment emphasized keeping birthmothers and their children together and recommended adoption only as a last resort (Watson, 1918, p. 103; Sheffield, 1919, pp. 77-78; Cleveland Protestant Orphan Asylum, 1922, 9-10; Colby, 1926; p. 3; O'Grady, 1927, pp. 15-16; Spence Alumnae Society, 1929, p. 8). Between 1928 and 1935, social casework methodology shifted, with momentous consequences, from Mary Richmond's environmental perspective to a more psychoanalytic orientation using the work of Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, and Alfred Adler (Hellenbrand, 1965, chaps. 2-4; Alexander, 1972). Between 1939 and 1958, as psychoanalytic theory came to dominate casework, social workers' interest in environmental factors waned, and they began to take their cues from psychiatric research conducted on unmarried mothers. These studies left little doubt that unwed mothers were psychologically unhealthy. One early investigation of 16 unmarried mothers in 1941, citing the work of the Freudian psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch, concluded that "these pregnancies represent hysterical dissociation states in which the girls act out their incest phantasies as an expression of the Oedipus situation" (Kasanin and Handschin, 1941, p. 83; Roazen, 1985; Webster, 1985). Another study of 54 unwed mothers, conducted by James Cattell, an experimental psychiatrist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, found the following distribution of diagnoses among its subjects: "character disorder, 30; neurotic reaction, 7 (anxiety, depressive, and conversion); schizophrenia, 17 (pseudoneurotic, 7; other types, 10)" (Cattell, 1954, p. 337). But it was the prolific Florence Clothier, a psychiatrist affiliated with Boston's New England Home for Little Wanderers, who brought the more technical psychiatric research to the attention

of social workers. In a series of articles appearing between 1941 and 1955, Clothier repeatedly stated that unmarried motherhood represented "a distorted and unrealistic way out of inner difficulties — common adolescent phantasies (rape, prostitution, and immaculate conception or parthenogenesis) and is comparable to neurotic symptoms on the one hand and delinquent behavior on the other" (Clothier, 1943a, p. 548; Clothier, 1941a; 1941b; 1955).

*Social Workers and Psychoanalytic
Studies of the Unmarried Mother*

Social workers medicalized the issue of illegitimacy by ignoring the host of hereditary and environmental conditions that may have caused it and instead focusing on the individual psychodynamics of unwed mothers. As early as 1933 social workers began using psychiatric concepts in nontechnical language to suggest that unwed mothers "seized every opportunity to escape from reality" and described them in their professional literature as neurotic, emotionally immature, and irresponsible (Henry, 1933, p. 76; Brisley, 1939, pp. 11–12). By the mid-1940s, social workers confidently asserted that "we know that the unmarried mother is an unhappy and neurotic girl who seeks through the medium of an out-of-wedlock baby to find an answer to her own unconscious conflicts and needs. She is acting out an unconscious, infantile fantasy, the roots of which are unknown to us but the results of which constitute an urgent problem" (Young, 1947, p. 27). And by 1958, the psychiatric view of unmarried mothers was incorporated into the CWLA's influential *Standards for Adoption Service* which stated that unwed mothers "have serious personality disturbances [and] need help with their emotional problems" (Child Welfare League of America, 1958, p. 14).

The logic of this diagnosis carried within it the prescription for treating unmarried mothers. Because the child was portrayed as a symptom of unwed mothers' neurotic drives, social workers believed that, with rare exceptions, unmarried mothers were incapable of providing sustained care and security for their babies (Clothier, 1941, p. 2). This led social workers such as the St. Louis Children's Aid Society's Ruth F. Brenner to question

"whether mothers as emotionally immature as these have any interest in planning a sound future for their babies" (Brenner, 1939, p. 23). Clothier had no doubts of unwed mothers' unfitness for parenthood. She claimed to have "never seen a school age, neurotic, unmarried mother who I thought would gain by keeping her baby, or who would be able to provide well for the baby" (Clothier, 1955, p. 645). The inescapable conclusion social workers drew from the professional social work literature was that the best treatment was to separate the unmarried mother from her child. Caseworkers were advised "to help the unmarried mother to see that she was using the baby as a symbol of neurotic need and that she did not have to keep it on that basis" (Schertz, 1947, pp. 59-60). When considering those unwed mothers who wanted to keep their children or maintain contact with them, social workers echoed Helene Deutsch's observation that "the least mature among unmarried mothers are the very ones who often fight to keep their children" (Deutsch, 1945, 2:376; Schertz, 1947, p. 61; Young, 1947, pp. 27-28, 33).

The Society and Psychoanalytic Studies of the Unmarried Mother

CHSW personnel adopted this psychoanalytic view of unmarried mothers. As late as 1971, the Society's Director of Social Services Ben Eide urged caseworkers to read Sarah Evan's "The Unwed Mother's Indecision About Her Baby as a Defense Mechanism," a 1958 article published with the imprimatur of the Child Welfare League of America. Evan stated as axiomatic two premises of psychoanalytic research concerning unmarried mothers. First, the pregnancy was "a fantasy fulfillment of Oedipal and pre-Oedipal strivings or a neurotic solution to such problems as loss of a loved person, or anxieties about one's sexuality." Second, the best solution for the majority of unwed mothers was to give the baby up. Evan argued that the unmarried mother's resistance to placing the child for adoption should be understood in "terms of the dynamics of defense and symptom formation." Therefore, the caseworker's job was to assist the client to recognize her defenses and help her work through them (Evan, 1958, p. 18). CHSW adoption caseworkers read Evan and followed her recommendations. They helped unmarried women arrive, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes with

ease, at a decision to relinquish their children to the Society. In difficult cases, they sought the advice of outside psychiatric consultants and accepted their diagnosis that unmarried mothers displayed "many characteristics of an adolescent character disorder with many hysterical features."²⁶ In this milieu, it is not surprising that CHSW adoption workers began withholding photographs from unwed birthmothers and restricting their contact with their children and their children's adoptive parents.

Origins of the Society's Restrictive Policy Toward Adult Adopted Persons

Changing Definitions of Social Work Professionalism

A somewhat different set of social circumstances accounts for the Society's change in policy on releasing information to adult adopted persons. One factor may have been changing definitions of professionalism and increasing bureaucratization. As we have seen, social workers during the Progressive era advocated keeping records to conduct scientific casework *and* because the child had a right to know his family history. After the Second World War, the CWLA's *Standards for Adoption Service* continued to recommend these twin objectives to member agencies, though the child's right to family information was clouded by the ambiguous injunction that the agency should preserve family history "which can be made available when needed" (Child Welfare League of America, 1958, p. 47). By 1969, however, Society officials had dropped the emphasis on providing the client with information. Following Gordon Hamilton's authoritative *Principles of Social Case Recording* (1946), they viewed case records only as illustrative of "the process in a particular adoption," and as an "aid to the supervisor in working with the social workers and to administration in reviewing and assessing the services of the agency."²⁷ In practice, this meant the Society emphasized keeping detailed records on the care given to unmarried mothers, the prospective adoptive parents' interview, and the child's placement, as well as specific administrative responsibilities such as raising money, plant construction, hiring

staff, and meeting payrolls. But the institution's duty to preserve family information *for the child* had disappeared from the CHSW's mission.

Freudian Family Romance Theory

Psychoanalytic studies conducted on adopted children and adults also strongly influenced the Society's increasingly restrictive policy toward releasing family information after World War II. Society adoption workers began interpreting adult adopted persons who searched for their birthparents as "very disturbed young people" and "sick youths," a perspective grounded in the psychoanalytic concept of the family romance fantasy. First articulated by Sigmund Freud and then transmitted to psychiatric social workers by Otto Rank in his *Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, this concept received special emphasis in the psychology of adopted children developed by psychotherapists Helene Deutsch and Florence Clothier (Freud, 1959; Rank, 1952; Deutsch, 1930; Clothier 1939, pp. 612-14; 1943b, pp. 228-230). According to Freud, the family romance is a common fantasy of most small children who, when sensing that their affection for their parents is "not being fully reciprocated," imagine they are a "step-child or an adopted child." Wishing to be free of his parents, the child develops a fantasy in which he is the child of "others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing." The child's fantasy, however, of being adopted occurs only at the first or asexual stage of family romance development. When, during the "second (sexual) stage of the family romance," the child attains knowledge of the mother and father's sexual relationship, the family romance "undergoes a curious curtailment," and the child no longer believes he has two sets of parents. The child now exalts the father, based on his earlier memory of an all-loving parent. As Freud observed, the child "is turning away from the father whom he knows today to the father in whom he believed in the earlier years of his childhood; and his fantasy is no more than the expression of regret that those happy days have gone" (Freud, 1959, pp. 238-241; Freud, 1964, p. 12). In normal child development, the fantasy of being adopted subsides quickly.

*Social Workers Apply Freudian Family
Romance Theory to Adopted Persons*

Clothier wrote a series of articles between 1939 and 1943 that ignored Freud's second stage of the family romance and made the first or asexual stage of family romance fantasy central to the psychodynamics of the adopted child. Relying heavily on Deutsch and Rank, she postulated that the adopted child, who in fact had two sets of parents, did not experience the family romance as a fantasy. The adopted child's inability to use reality to neutralize fantasy, as nonadopted children did, served to strengthen and confirm the family romance (Clothier, 1939, pp. 612–14; 1943b, pp. 228–30). Clothier, for the first time in social welfare research, used the family romance concept to question the therapeutic benefit of providing adopted adults with identifying information. If reality could not dissipate fantasy, then telling an adopted person that "his father was such-and-such person" could not "in any way assuage his need of a real father" (Clothier, 1943b, pp. 578–579). With this logic psychoanalysts began to undermine the rationale for giving identifying information to adult adopted persons.

Although hesitating to draw definite conclusions until more clinical research was conducted, Clothier suggested that therapists consider the hypothesis that adopted children with behavior problems might be living out the family romance fantasy. By the 1950s, Clothier's tentative suggestion had evolved into a proven conclusion. Writing in 1953 and citing Deutsch's and Clothier's early articles, New York psychotherapist Viola W. Bernard asserted that the adopted child's inability to rid himself of the family romance fantasy was part of the "symptomatology of emotionally disturbed adoptive children." She concluded that "the most potent antidote to excessive and persistent pathological recourse to this escapist fantasy is a healthy, secure, satisfying relationship between the child and his adoptive parents"²⁸ (Bernard, 1953, p. 431). Social workers would interpret this tenet of psychoanalytic theory to mean that searching for birthparents was pathological and, by extension, represented the failure of the adoptive process. In 1958, CHSW adoption supervisor Evelyn Tibbals described to her staff several examples of adult adopted persons searching for their

"natural parents" and made clear her belief that "the troubled adult was a pretty unhappy, disturbed person."²⁹

The Society's Postadoption Contact Policy Toward Adult Adopted Persons

A decade later, Society officials incorporated into their 1968 "Adoption Manual" all the contradictory strands of social work theory and practice that had characterized the CHSW's response to adult adopted persons who sought family information or desired to locate their birthparents. Reflecting the period of openness — roughly from its beginnings to the late 1950s — the CHSW's "Adoption Manual" affirmed the adult adopted person's right to family background information. Overlapping with the period of openness was a transitional decade between 1958 and 1968 in which the Society restricted adult adopted person's access to family information. Reflecting this new emphasis on secrecy, the Society's guidelines for postadoption contact exhibited its reliance on psychiatric theory. The fault line became nonidentifying versus identifying information. For those adult adopted persons desiring nonidentifying information, the Society showed its early, more open face. The manual instructed caseworkers that an adult adopted person requesting family information "should be encouraged to come for an interview" and treated "with a sensitive interest in his inquiry."³⁰ The Society expected caseworkers to reveal nonidentifying information even though this was contrary to law. As CHSW Associate Director Joseph T. Chambers frankly admitted to the CWLA's 1978 follow-up survey on the sealed adoption records controversy, the Society's "practice is to give non-identifying [information] in violation of law."³¹ Also reminiscent of the earlier period was the manual's injunction to present "unpleasant" information about birthparents "in a way that will enable a client to use it constructively." The manual specifically instructed caseworkers to handle with care data surrounding the circumstances of the child's relinquishment and to emphasize to the person seeking this information that "his natural parents were unable to provide for him and acted responsibly in this adoptive planning for him."³² The Society's adoption workers repeatedly put the manual's instructions into practice.³³

When discussing requests of adult adopted persons for identifying information, however, the manual's tone and content changed abruptly. It stated bluntly that "for reasons of confidentiality," no identifying information should be released to adult adopted persons. The manual characterized an individual requesting identifying information as usually a person who "has had many unhappy past experiences and . . . is so intent upon finding the natural parent that he is not able to consider his request in a realistic or rational way." It advised the caseworker to discourage the adult adopted person's quest and suggested that "the person may be relieved by being stopped . . . but often he merely feels frustrated."³⁴ Though not stated in the manual, the caseworker's next step was to refer the client to "a treatment agency," which probably meant seeing a psychiatrist. One can only imagine what adoption supervisor Lucille T. Kane thought when she suggested to Susan G., a woman who requested identifying information in 1956, that "she seek psychiatric help for this long standing problem" and Susan replied that "she had already talked to Psychiatrists who told her it would be a good thing if she could see her mother."³⁵ The manual did note, however, that for the Susans of this world "who cannot accept that [they] have problems, referral to a treatment agency may not be appropriate."³⁶

The 1968 manual did not fundamentally change the Society's policy of facilitating sibling reunions or acting as an intermediary between adult adopted persons and adoptive parents. In 1971, however, the Society stopped releasing identifying information to adopted adults searching for their siblings. The Society's decision was prompted by Nancy I.'s request for her adopted brother's whereabouts. At a full-scale staff meeting called specifically to discuss the issue, the question of whether to release that information ignited "considerable discussion." The staff members finally hammered out a consensus that "to divulge information of this type is not allowable by law." They left it to Director of Social Services Ben Eide to inform Nancy that "Washington State Law is quite specific (Revised Code of Washington 26.36.020 and 26.36.030) in stating agencies cannot release information from records without a court order." Eide enclosed a copy of the law and invited Nancy to get a court

order "which would force the agency to release the information you seek."⁵⁰ By 1974, Society caseworkers such as Doris Gillespie routinely turned down requests by adult adopted persons for identifying information about their biological families with what by then had become formulaic language: "adoption records are sealed and our agency had no authority to reveal identifying information."⁵¹

Summary and Conclusions

Throughout the twentieth century — well before the birth of the Adoption Rights Movement — adult adopted persons and birthparents returned to adoption agencies for answers to questions about themselves and their birth families. They did so for the same reasons as individuals do today: to obtain genetic background information, to satisfy their curiosity about the circumstances of their birth, and to search for biological family members. This historical analysis of the Children's Home Society of Washington reveals a past that is unknown to historians, social workers, adoption rights activists, and members of the adoption triad. It is clear that Society officials and caseworkers, often despite laws to the contrary, adhered to cultural values and professional ethics stressing family preservation. These ethics encouraged them to release identifying information to adult clients. Reinforcing their belief in family preservation was the demographic circumstances of the Society's pre-World War II clientele: older, married, impoverished birthmothers who had already bonded with their older children before relinquishment. These biological ties and memories, broken by circumstances beyond the control of family members, gave birthparents and adoptees a special claim to family information. In keeping with their own professional standards, which gave them enormous discretion, however, Society caseworkers would not reveal to birthparents the location of adopted children and refrained from conveying "unpleasant" truths to adult adopted persons, a minority of whom had been born out of wedlock or had a medical history or racial background that was thought to be stigmatizing.

For several reasons, adoption agencies became more restrictive in releasing identifying information after the Second World

War. First, social workers slowly shifted their primary emphasis from providing postadoption clients with family information to concentrating on the adoptive process itself and agency administration. Second, the Cold War and the concomitant growth of professional secrecy, along with changing demographic circumstances, encouraged the Society to accept the findings of psychiatric research, which in turn reinforced the CHSW's restrictive policy. As birthmothers became younger and relinquished infants born out of wedlock, Society adoption workers convinced themselves that birthmothers had not bonded with their children, who in turn did not remember their mothers. Under these dramatically altered conditions, case workers accepted both a body of psychiatric research that medicalized the issue of illegitimacy by identifying unmarried mothers as borderline psychotics and a variant of Freudian family romance fantasy theory that viewed adopted adults' requests for identifying information as evidence of psychological maladjustment. It is somewhat ironic that the Adoption Rights Movement has placed its faith in psychoanalysts, such as Robert Jay Lifton and Arthur D. Sorosky, who claim that the identity problems of adopted persons in late adolescence and young adulthood would be solved by opening the records, when it was a previous body of psychiatric research, emphasizing the behavioral and emotional problems of unmarried mothers and adopted children, that contributed to closing the records in the first place (Lifton, (1976; Sorosky, 1975, 1978). Adoption rights activists, in their quest for their biological families, incorrectly assume that they are demanding the opening of records that have *always* been sealed and fail to understand the multiple factors responsible for sealing adoption records. A longer historical perspective reveals instead a more complicated — but more usable — past.

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Notes

1. The original name of the CHSW was the Washington Children's Home Society. In 1959, the Society's name was changed to the Children's Home Society of Washington to make clear to the public it was *not* a state

run or supported child welfare institution. Except for the description of the Society's founding, the CHSW's current name will be used throughout this article. (Children's Home Society of Washington. (1970). *Children's Home Society of Washington, History, 1970*. Unpublished manuscript in the Children's Home Society of Washington Archives; hereafter cited as CHSWA).

2. CHSW, *Children's Home Society of Washington, History, 1970*. (1970). CHSWA; CHSW, *Plans to '75: Report and Recommendations from the Long-Range Planning Committee*. (March 9, 1967), Appendix, D, CHSWA.
3. The case records are located at the Children's Home Society of Washington, Adoption Resource Center, 3300 N.E. 65th Street, Seattle, WA 98115; hereafter cited as CHSW CR. This article will not discuss the Society's policy toward adoptive parents' request for information. Instead it will focus on the CHSW's policy toward releasing information to adult adopted persons and birthmothers because they are the principal founders of the Adoption Rights Movement. It is these two groups' claim that they have always been denied access to their adoption records that this article is challenging.
4. CHSW CR 1622. All names of CHSW clients used in this article are fictitious.
5. See, for example, CHSW CR 4672.
6. CHSW CR 122.
7. CHSW CR 1282. See also CHSW CR 1162, 6312, 572, 5342, 4272. As late as 1952 the Society was still telling birthmothers that they would keep their names on file to give to their children if the children should ever inquire at the Society for their birthparents. See, for example, CHSW CR 6632 and 4262.
8. CHSW. (January 27, 1978). A survey to determine agency policies and practices related to the release of adoption information. Folder: CHSW Papers: Questionnaire Requests-Reports, 1974-1979, CHSWA.
9. CHSW CR 1832.
10. CHSW CR 1602.
11. See, for example, CHSW CR 614, 132, 1022, 1322, 1692, 1872, 1902, 2242, 2382, 2520, 3022, 3792, 4622. Although four-fifths of the pre-1946 Children's Home Society of Minnesota (CHSM) adoption case records have been destroyed, it is clear from the extant ones that the CHSM had a similar policy of revealing both identifying and nonidentifying information. See, for example, Children's Home Society of Minnesota, Case Record 2643, 2928, Children's Home Society of Minnesota, St. Paul; hereafter cited as CHSM CR.
12. See, for example, CHSW CR 212, 2431, 3352, 8082.
13. CHSW CR 1283. See also CHSW CR 2832, 3552, 6052.
14. CHSW CR 1393, 2154, 2914, 4142, 5432, 6852, 7672, 7942. The Children's Home Society of Minnesota had an identical policy. See, for example, CHSM CR 3660.
15. CHSW CR 2834, 3356, 882, 2630, 6322, 8512, 8662, 9842.

16. CHSW CR 7242. For additional examples of caseworkers withholding family information, see CHSW CR 2232, 2630, 3102, 3782.
17. As late as 1940, adoption workers used the phrase "foster parents" when they clearly meant "adoptive parents." See, for example, Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society, 1916, pp. 4, 5; Cleveland Protestant Orphan Asylum, 1925, p. 10; Children's Home Society of Florida, 1926, p. 1; Spence Alumnae Society, 1940, p. 7. The confusing interchangeability of the terms is nicely captured in the title of Rathbun, 1944.
18. These figures are based on a sample of 34 cases. A comparison of the rate of legitimacy between birthmothers who returned for family information and *all* CHSW birthmothers reveals that the sample is representative. The rate of legitimacy among all pre-1946 birthmothers was 58% (N=741). CHSW CR.
19. CHSW CR 11202, 16062, 19582.
20. CHSW CR 11202. See also CHSW CR 9662.
21. CHSW CR 15072, 15212, 12792. See also CHSW CR 14573.
22. CHSW CR 12792.
23. CHSW CR 7942.
24. CHSW CR 7072. See also CHSW CR 5693.
25. CHSW CR 16433.
26. CHSW CR 18993.
27. Children's Home Society of Washington. (1968). *Adoption Manual*. Unpublished manuscript. Part IV: "Recording," pp. 1-2, CHSWA; hereafter cited as "Adoption Manual."
28. Bernard was reprinted in the widely read Smith, 1963.
29. CHSW, "Minutes of General Staff Meeting" November 12, 1958, CHSWA.
30. "Adoption Manual," Part I, Sect. G: "Post-Adoption Services and Service on Closed Cases," p. 11b.
31. "A Survey to Determine Agency Policies and Practices Related to the Release of Adoption Information," January 27, 1978, Folder: CHSW Papers: Questionnaire Requests—Reports, 1974-1979, CHSWA.
32. "Adoption Manual," p. 11b.
33. CHSW CR 3122, 4181, 6921, 7285, 8306, 9032.
34. "Adoption Manual," p. 11b.
35. CHSW CR 7082.
36. "Adoption Manual," p. 11b.
37. CHSW CR 11834. See also CHSW CR 16433.
38. CHSW CR 12812.

